

January 11, 2017

**TO:** Mayor and Members of City Council

**FROM:** Harry Black, City Manager

**SUBJECT: Community Engagement Report for FY 2018/2019 Biennial Budget**

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In February 2016, the City of Cincinnati Budget Office, Department of City Planning, and the City Manager's Office of Communications began discussing an action plan for achieving richer community engagement as part of the development of the FY 2018-2019 Biennial Budget. There is a strong desire to improve the engagement process and create more options for collecting and organizing citizen feedback in addition to the daily feedback from various city outlets including: Fix It Cincy, the Citizen Service Requests, and direct citizen contact via telephone, e-mail, social media and in person.

The following summarizes the budget engagement schedule, information gathered, and results to better inform the mayor, council, and administration in development of the biennial budget.

The revamped public engagement process includes various information gathering techniques to maximize the input received including:

- Creation of a budget engagement website to keep people informed of upcoming opportunities.
- Offering two online surveys to gather important feedback about budget engagement.
- Publishing a short educational video about the City Budget.
- Collecting more than 80 project requests from Community Councils through the Community Budget Request (CBR) process.
- Launching the Neighborhood Project Suggestion form on the City Planning website collecting more than 150 suggestions City Departments reviewed and responded to.
- Three Budget Basics presentations providing educational sessions.
- Two Public Input Forums continuing the education process and collecting feedback.

Attachment 1 summarizes the FY 2018/2019 Biennial Budget Schedule. Below is a summary of the techniques used, and various tools used to share the input gathered.

## **Creation of Public Engagement Website**

In the initial stages of reviewing best practices for community engagement in regards to city budgets was an integral step dedicating a webpage solely for budget engagement. The website: <http://cincinnati-oh.gov/finance/cincinnati-budget-engagement/> provides all the information and links pertinent to the budget engagement process, including the Budget Office website, online surveys, a brief educational video on the budget, announcement of the budget basic sessions and public input forums including dates and locations, and a link to the Neighborhood Project Suggestions.

A link to the page existed in a primary banner at the top of the City's homepage from August 15th until December 5th. The webpage was viewed roughly 1,100 times so far.

Beyond the homepage, the City shared numerous photos, factoids, event details and general information related to the City's budget and budgeting process via various social media accounts. The City's primary Twitter account has 57,000 followers, and its Facebook and LinkedIn accounts each have approximately 5,000 followers.

Other City departments have shared similar details via their respective social media accounts as well. The City also has a reach of more than 27,000 Cincinnati residents via Nextdoor. This vehicle, and the other social media platforms, has been used to share several surveys related to the budget and to request Neighborhood Project Suggestions.

In addition, the City has posted various media to Instagram and Vimeo related to the budget. In fact, the City's "Your City Budget" educational video has been posted on the CitiCable Vimeo site since September 30th. It also aired on CitiCable, which has both cable and online audiences.

## **Community Budget Request**

The Community Budget Request (CBR) is the official project request mechanism for the Community Councils. The CBR process allows Community Councils to submit up to three projects they feel are paramount to the neighborhood preservation and/or revitalization. Submitted projects are reviewed and considered by the appropriate City Departments for inclusion in the requested FY 2018-2019 capital budget.

The CBR process began May 17, 2016 with an orientation meeting for Community Council members and department representatives including 30 people representing 23 neighborhoods. A brief presentation was given about what the CBR process was, changes, and examples of past projects. Additionally, one of the CBR process changes was the transition to the online form. In order to help improve the process, the CBR form was placed for efficiency and easy access by Community Councils and City Departments. We are also planning to place the preliminary and final disposition reports online for public viewing.

The deadline for submitting projects was September 23, 2016. Thirty-one neighborhoods submitted CBRs. There were a total of 85 project requests submitted

and reviewed by City departments. A summary of the requests and feedback is on Attachment 2.

### **Neighborhood Project Suggestion Form**

New for this biennial budget process is the creation of the Neighborhood Project Suggestion Form (NPS) where in addition to Community Councils, citizens could request projects and funding for various neighborhood needs.

The NPS form went online in May 2016 and closed in November 2016. There were 156 NPS forms received. Staff compiled the submissions and findings, forwarded them to the appropriate departments and responded directly to each request. This proved an extremely successful process of gathering individual requests outside of the official CBR process. Attachment 3 summarizes the NPS forms and subsequent communication back to the citizens.

### **Budget Surveys**

Two online surveys were released to the public to help influence the priorities and services of the City.

The first survey, “Cincinnati Budget Engagement Survey,” was released August 16, 2016 and closed September 14, 2016. A total of 288 responses were received, with respondents representing all segments of the City. The majority of respondents were between the ages 26 and 55 years old, 55% were female, and 80% of respondents were homeowners.

The survey asked participants to rate the quality of city services, rank important services and names any needing improvement. The survey also asked questions related to awareness of the City Budget, how people would like to receive budget information, and how they prefer to provide their feedback.

Some of the most valuable feedback detailed the majority of the respondents felt the overall quality of services provided by the City of Cincinnati was “Fair” to “Good.” The top four most important services ranked included: Public Safety (Police/Fire/Emergency Medical Services), Garbage/Recycling/Yard Waste Pick-Up, Street Maintenance & Snow Removal, and Parks and Public Green Spaces.

Respondents also felt that Blight Removal & Litter Control, Street Maintenance and Snow Removal needed improvements and additional resources. The survey asked an open-ended question about how the City of Cincinnati can improve quality of life. It was found that people wanted a greater focus on neighborhood development, improved infrastructure (roads, bridges, sidewalks, etc.), increased police visibility and interaction with community, improved public transportation, and greater enforcement of drug related activities.

In regard to City Budget communications, almost half of the respondents indicated they have a “good” awareness of the City Budget and 42% of respondents said they have a “poor” awareness of the City Budget, which indicates a large portion of residents are likely uninformed when it comes to the budget. Another question asked respondents

how they would like to learn about the City Budget to which most indicated online surveys, frequent updates on the website and social media.

The second online survey, “City of Cincinnati 2018-2019 Budget Feedback,” was released October 13, 2016 and closed November 11, 2016. A total of 343 responses were received with 43% representation from the east side of Cincinnati, approximately 20-23% in central and north Cincinnati, and about 12% of respondents from the west side. Sixty percent of the respondents were female, 40% were between 40-64 years old, and almost 90% were homeowners.

Survey respondents were asked about their level of satisfaction with City services. Garbage/Recycling/Yard Waste Pick-Up as well as Parks and Green Spaces received mostly “Very Satisfied” or “Satisfied” rankings. Services that ranked mostly as “Needs Improvement” included Blight Removal & Litter Control/Pick-up.

Participants were also asked if they had an additional \$100,000 in the budget what they would spend it on. Top answers included Blight Removal & Litter Control/Pick-Up, Public Safety and Street Maintenance & Snow Removal.

Respondents were also asked if there was a shortfall of \$100,000 in the budget, what they would reduce to balance the budget; top answers included Human Services, raise property taxes and Recreational Services/Facilities.

The survey summaries can be found in Attachment 4.

### **“Budget Basics” Meetings**

A critical part of the budget engagement process is the educational component improving citizens and neighborhoods ability to make informed decisions. The Budget Office and Department of City Planning conducted three “Budget Basics” evening meetings in summer 2016 at the Pleasant Ridge, Dunham, and Evanston Recreation Centers to help ensure better access for all neighborhoods.

The meetings began with introductions and a presentation about the various components of the City budget as well as the public participation portion of the City budget process. The meetings lasted about two hours and were a valuable exchange of information between the City and participants. The presentation was made available online for those who could not attend the meeting. If questions were asked that couldn’t be directly answered at the meetings, City staff followed up with those individuals via e-mail or by phone.

The Budget Basics presentation is Attachment 5.

### **“Your City Budget” Public Input Forums**

In fall 2016, it was important to continue the educational budget process as well as for citizens to provide their feedback. Two “Your City Budget” Public Input Forums were held in the evening on October 18 and November 2 at the Evanston and Price Hill Recreation Centers, respectively.

The structure of the meetings included a discussion about budget strategy, results from the Budget Engagement survey, an educational Budget Basics video, and a group exercise on balancing the City Budget. As part of the breakout exercise, participants were to act as City Council members and were given a structurally balanced budget and a list of possible additions and reductions to the budget. Their assignment was to review the additions and reductions sheets on their own and determine which items they wanted added to the budget thus causing them to select an offsetting reduction.

As a group, they came together to vote on each item to determine what should be added and subsequently reduced to pass a structurally balanced budget. Attached are the instruction sheets, handouts and exercise results. While the results are biased in that there was a fixed list of difficult choices to make, there was an overall education and appreciation of the process. Positive feedback was received through the exit surveys and e-mails that thanked staff for a creative approach to learning about the budget.

These are shown in Attachment 6.

### **Summary**

The City has revamped the budget citizen engagement process to gather a variety of information for Council, the Mayor and Administration to rely on as the FY 2018/2019 Biennial Budget is created.

While this is a great start to enhance engagement, additional feedback is welcomed as the process is continually improved. The attached information will aid Council in identifying priorities as the Budget Policy Motion is developed.

Staff will reach out to the Budget and Finance Committee to schedule a presentation.

cc: Christopher A. Bigham, Budget Director  
Charles Graves, Planning Director  
Rocky Merz, Communications Director